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Peculiar speech: preaching to the baptized

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This book is recommended reading, especially if you are prepared to have some of your views stretched and challenged by historical argument.

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Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized

William H. Willimon

Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1992
xi + 124 pp.

"How many of our sermons speak as if no one in particular has gathered here, as if we are an audience of disinterested listeners, as if nothing like life or death were at stake in our speech? Such speaking is an affront to the dignity of the baptized. The baptized gather here on Sunday because they have been called, summoned.... *I* certainly did not call them. If *I* were calling a church, I doubt that I would have called *this* church. I am, I have noted over the years, a good deal more discriminating than God" (ix-x). So Willimon catapults himself into his prime question: "What difference does it make to our preaching that all of us there are either preparing for baptism or else trying to figure out what happened when we were baptized?" (3).

Holding a high doctrine of baptism as initiation into the church, and holding to a high doctrine of the church as the called-and-incorporated-by-baptism communion of God, Willimon vigorously makes a case for preaching as distinctive discourse arising from both those realities. "We preach either under the promise of baptism, 'Come forth, be washed, and you shall be odd,' or the mandate of baptism, 'You are washed, you are ordained, you are odd.' Do we preachers appreciate the baptismal, liturgical quality of our speech?" (3). Because preachers speak within the distinctive community they "talk funny" (6). He accuses the church (especially liberal, mainline Protestantism—he himself is United Methodist) of trying desperately to use every language but its own. "In conservative contexts, gospel speech is traded for dogmatic assertion and moralism, gospel self-help psychologies and narcotic mantras. In more liberal speech, talk tiptoes around the outrage of Christian discourse and ends up as innocuous, though urbane, affirmation of the ruling order. Unable to preach Christ and him crucified, we preach humanity and it improved" (9). But the church, by virtue of baptism, is called to be a counter-reality in the world. "We preach, like John or Jesus, among the family, bringing to speech that which has happened in our baptism" (75). More, the church, by virtue of baptism, is called to create a new world: "Christian speakers do not just massage the world as we find it. We create a new world" (86), in which our hearers, the church, can live.

Willimon knows very well that the preacher's voice is not the only voice the church hears. We preach also to "worldly" people. But even here he argues passionately for "peculiar speech" which maintains its stand on baptism in spite of those nasty Christian peculiarities. Romans 6 is his basic text, and from it he derives again and again the essential fact that baptism is conversion, transformation, death and resurrection, a putting off the old and a putting on of Christ. This is the language of the pre-Constantinian church in which, because of the hostile political environment, atonement meant the defeat of powers and principalities and the confession of Jesus as *Lord*: baptism was incorporation into a cosmic drama, "a victory that God was achieving in Christ throughout all creation" (105). In the post-Constantinian environment, when Christianity became legitimate and domestic, salvation was internalized and individualized: baptism became the washing away of the individual's personal sins and an appropriation of the Savior's personal sacrifice (104–107).

Those familiar with Willimon's torrent of books will recall the theme of *Resident Aliens*, the book Willimon wrote with the ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas (Abingdon, 1989), namely, the church as a colony of heaven in but not of the world. Throughout *Peculiar Speech* he carries on a running refutation of Richard Niebuhr's classic, *Christ and Culture*, which, he argues, was "rigged in such a way as to ensure that the reader will decide that the most pluralistic and inclusive of his five options, 'Christ Transforming Culture,' will be embraced as the most faithful" (97). This "imperialistic" concept is no longer tenable in our present society of "practical atheism" in which politics has become "modern humanity's only means of transcendence" (98). Thus, in effect, Willimon advocates "Christ Against Culture".

As always, Willimon is provocative and persuasive. Originally delivered as lectures at The Austin Presbyterian Seminary, Austin, Texas in 1991, the book maintains the energy and combativeness of that setting. Besides his controversy with Niebuhr, he roughs up Fred Craddock, David Tracy, the president of Yale, Leo Buscaglia, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Freud, Billy Graham, Karl Rahner, baptismal practices, children's sermons, etc. He likes Walter Brueggemann (to whom the book is dedicated), John Howard Yoder, Calvin, and Luther—and Jesus.

In chapter one, "Preaching As Baptismal Speech", he makes a case for the church's distinctive discourse, which is authoritative because it is based on an authoritative text; Jesus in his home synagogue is the paradigm. In chapter two, "Preaching As Baptismal Repentance", he works with water images to establish the radical rebirth created by baptism through a dismantling of perceived reality: Paul's peculiar feeding of the crew on the stormy voyage to Rome (Acts 26:32–27:36) is the paradigm for the "rough waters of baptism". In chapter three, "Preaching to Pagans", he challenges the church to refuse to take the world as it is: the paradigm is Paul in Athens (Acts 17:16–34). In chapter four, "Preaching As Politics", he argues that the political question is not whether or not the church shall engage in politics, but in what kind of politics the church shall engage;

the paradigm is the witnessing households established by the messengers sent out by Jesus "to prepare for him": (Luke 10:1-24). Thankfully—in a volume devoted to preaching—each chapter concludes with a sermon.

The Loyal Constantinian Opposition, judging by Douglas John Hall, is putting forward a deeply humble and chastened prospectus for the church in the "post-modern" world: the church is a minority, a "diaspora" network of communities, living out an alternative way of being in the world. Willimon, a member of this Opposition, is not so humble. Nevertheless, he is reminding the church—and particularly preachers—that baptism, which is to say church, is a profound, transforming reality, and its gospel and its claims are every bit as "intellectually valid" as "capitalism". Like Paul on the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34), we too are called not just to "massage the world as we find it", but to create a new world. Whether indeed that requires a "Christ Against Culture" stance is being debated.

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